

ONE FAR FIERCE HOUR
PALM SUNDAY
April 9, 2006

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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Mark 11:1-11

“Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy
branches. . . .
‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’”
Mark 11:8, 9 (NRSV)

When fishes flew and forests walked,
And figs grew upon thorns,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born. . . .
The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will,
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb.
I keep my secret still.
Fools! For I also had my hour,
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

G. K. Chesterton
“The Donkey”

Back in the old days, before we had so many children, the Palm Sunday procession began out of doors. The children, teachers, and a few parents assembled on Delaware, each carrying a palm branch. The procession was led by two ministers in their robes, traveled west to Rush Street, south to Chicago Avenue, east to Michigan Avenue and Water Tower Park, and, if all went exactly as planned, ended up at our front door precisely at 11:00 a.m. in order to process into the church while the congregation sang “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” When it worked, it was a thing of great beauty, an exercise in almost military precision. It often didn’t, of course, and the two ministers whose responsibility it was to lead the parade would regale us at the next staff meeting with accounts of near disasters—as children strayed or became distracted, of the various reactions of the few people on the sidewalk on Sunday morning, of the people sleeping on benches in Water

Tower Park rudely awakened by an army of children dressed up and waving palm branches. My favorite, and I haven't told this story for at least ten years, was when Jesse Allerton— a seven- or eight-year-old at the time, now a strapping twenty-something—got the word right—Hosanna!—but somehow confused the music and the meaning. All during the parade, Jesse entertained his friends by singing full voice, "Oh Hosanna, don't you cry for me, I'm goin' to Alabama with a banjo on my knee!" I confess that ever since, as we sing the glorious music of Palm Sunday, I hear in my mind that clear child voice, "Oh Hosanna, don't you cry for me."

It just may be the most important day of the Christian year. It is complex and complicated—just like so much of life is. It literally teems with irony. It begins with joyful festivity and ends quietly, ambiguously. Jesus rides into the city, welcomed by crowds of people waving branches and laying their cloaks in his path, and the day ends almost anticlimactically when he enters the temple, looks around, and leaves. It feels for all the world like a royal procession, but the mode of transportation is anything but royal. G. K. Chesterton captures the irony of it in his famous poem about the lowly, despised and derided donkey, the ass, with its "one far fierce hour" when there were shouts about its ears and palms before its feet.

In many churches it is the tradition to read the entire Passion narrative on Palm Sunday, to make sure everyone understands where this parade is headed. "Palm Sunday," Fleming Rutledge says, "has always been a crowd pleaser: the festivity of the procession, the stirring music, the repeated 'Hosannas.' And then we are plunged into the overwhelming drama of the passion. . . . It's not for the faint of heart" (*The Undoing of Death*).

The temptation has always been to focus on the positive and simply neglect the irony, the undercurrent of tragedy, and in the process to miss the meaning and the power altogether.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their new book, *The Last Week*, with the striking observation that there were two processions entering Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year."

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered the city at the head of a column of Imperial Cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilates' proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.

It was standard practice for the Roman governor to move from his splendid palace in Caesarea, on the sea, to Jerusalem for all major Jewish festivals, bringing with him a military contingent. The Romans were the occupiers, and occupiers—Israel in the West Bank, our nation in Iraq—have their hands full. Passover, after all, was a patriotic holiday when the Jews remembered and celebrated their liberation centuries earlier from Egyptian slavery and their journey toward nationhood, freedom, and a land of their own. That's potent, particularly in the capital city, under hated foreign occupation. So Pilate came with troops to reinforce the garrison at the Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem, where tourists today are taken and shown the scratchings in the stone floor left by bored soldiers playing an ancient game of tic-tac-toe, maybe waiting to interrogate the prisoner, Jesus. That's five days later. Today Pilate is wary; his eyes scan the silent onlooking crowd for danger.

"Imagine that procession," Borg and Crossan write. "A visual panoply of imperial power: Cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, harnesses, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums."

What was on display in that parade was not only Roman imperial power but Roman imperial theology. Ever since the great Augustus Caesar announced that he was the son of God, Roman emperors were considered to be divine, including the current emperor, Tiberius. Rome had no argument with other religions, with a single exception: a monotheistic religion that insisted that there was only one God and that it certainly wasn't the Roman emperor; a religion, that is to say, like the religion of the Jews. This small, feisty people, with their peculiar insistence that there is one God, that Caesar is not God, were a threat to the whole Roman system. And here comes one of them, on the very day Pilate is showing the colors, demonstrating who's really in charge, here comes one of them riding into the city in the very way the people's prophets had said the real king would come, their Messiah, their savior.

When Jesus selected a donkey, when he rode into the city in exactly the way the prophet Zechariah had predicted—

Lo, your king comes to you;
humble and lowly,

riding on a colt,
the foal of a donkey—

it was a direct challenge to Roman power and authority. It was, in fact, a counterprocession to Pilate's. It was, Borg and Crossan say, "a planned political demonstration."

It is important to note what doesn't happen on Palm Sunday. Mark's enigmatic ending to the account of the day's activities is significant. Jesus went to the temple, looked around, and left. He would return the next day and drive out the money changers and in the process totally alienate the temple leaders, who would then turn against him. But today—at the climax, with the splendid chaos of the messianic procession behind him, with peasants full of patriotic fervor—what he did not do was organize and lead a revolt. That's what the people expected and wanted: a strong leader, in the mold of David the King, who would rally the people, recruit the active insurgency that was already striking at Rome and ready to do more, strike a blow against the hated Roman occupiers, driving Pilate and his legions and their horses and chariots into the sea. It did not happen. Jesus was not an insurrectionist. He was not a revolutionary, at least not that kind. His revolution—and it truly was, and is, a revolution—was a revolution of love. His reign was, and is, not one of power and domination, but justice and kindness. His kingdom was, and is, not one of military might, but compassion.

But make no mistake about it—Jesus, on Palm Sunday, places himself, and therefore people who would follow him, squarely in the middle of life at its most human. Palm Sunday forever destroys any notion that Christianity is an otherworldly religion, concerned mostly about life in the hereafter. On Palm Sunday, Jesus goes public and calls his disciples to live their lives and make their witness in the world.

The Jewish theologian, the late Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that "religion begins in mysticism and ends in politics."

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "When we talk about love, we have to become mature or we will become sentimental. Basically love means being responsible, responsibility to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind" (*Justice and Mercy*, p. 35).

On Palm Sunday, Jesus leads us into the public arena with all its ambiguity and strong partisanship and political maneuvering. We follow—not as political partisans, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as followers of one whose reign is a reign of love, and we come to our political convictions out of our deepest values, which are formed by him and our commitment to him

and his reign. Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, says, "God is not a Republican or a Democrat." God is God. And God cares a lot about what goes on in the public arena, particularly when it comes to the little ones, the vulnerable, the poor. Budgets, Wallis says, are moral documents insofar as they express our values. And budgets that take money from programs that help poor people, about which the Bible has a great deal to say, while granting tax breaks to rich people are not moral.

One of the critical issues before us as a nation is immigration. There are efforts in Congress that would make life more difficult for people who come here to find work and end up staying. Some are punitive. Some even propose punitive measures for people who help illegal immigrants, like churches, like this church. Cardinal Roger Mahoney of the Los Angeles Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, was exactly right when he said that should that measure become law, he would instruct Catholic Christians and Catholic churches to disobey it.

It is a complex, nonpartisan, public issue. The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago has issued a fine statement, which says immigration policy "tests the political and moral integrity of our nation."

The statement acknowledges the complexity of the issue—economic and social—and offers suggestions. Copies of the statement are available in the Loggia at the Advocacy table. I can't imagine a more appropriate or faithful way to observe Palm Sunday, the day our Lord rode into the heart of the capital city, than to become informed about an issue he would certainly have cared deeply about, with his propensity to be with the marginalized, poor, outcast, and vulnerable, and then write a letter or pick up the phone and express yourself.

Jesus invites us to be part of his reign, his kingdom, which exists right in the center of life, a realm within a realm that is utterly realistic about life in the world, but that is utterly committed to an alternate set of values based on love—not sentimental love, but tough love, realistic love, strong love, like his.

What does that look like? I love the story Bayard Rustin used to tell about an incident at the height of the Civil Rights movement, with mounting conflict, deep passion on all sides, demonstrations and arrests. The Ku Klux Klan was marching into Montgomery and heading towards Martin Luther King's church in order to intimidate. Rustin and King were discussing what to do. King said, let's tell everybody to put their good clothes on, stand on the steps of the church, and applaud as they march by. They did—stood on the church steps and applauded the Ku Klux Klan. The Klansmen could not

comprehend what was happening. They soon dispersed and left (Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*).

Jesus Christ bids us come and live for him right in the middle of life.

In his new book, *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills calls Jesus “God’s rescue raid into history.” And today we remember that he comes to us, in our personal lives, to our very hearts, just as he came to the city.

I’m reading the autobiography of one of the great Presbyterian ministers of the last generation, David H. C. Read, longtime pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Read was a Scot, a chaplain in the British Army as World War II broke out. In 1940 he was captured and spent the next five years in POW camps. In the spring of 1945, as the Allied forces closed in and the end seemed near, treatment of POWs significantly worsened. Prisoners were transferred away from the advancing armies, marched for days and crowded into filthy camps with little food or water and no sanitation.

Near the end, the British prisoners were moved again to a new camp and were joined by several thousand Americans. Read tells about his first Sunday in the new camp. There was no chapel, so the men gathered in an open space, lying on the ground, some standing, sitting, some wounded, some sick, some dying. It was Palm Sunday, and Read had no notes, no sermon manuscript, so he told the story, of

the way Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem, ready to endure whatever might happen to him there. I spoke of his sharing everything that had happened, or could happen to us, and how God comes close to us in him. I spoke of the Easter that was a week away. . . . All of us knew we’d either be free or dead by then. In a way, far from the conventional sense of the words, we knew we were “in the hands of God” . . . in the presence of Christ and his cross. (*God Was in the Laughter*, p. 93)

For those prisoners, between freedom and death, not knowing which was ahead, the story about God coming close in Jesus Christ, sharing everything that had happened or could happen to them, must have been profoundly comforting and encouraging.

This is the day he shows us that he comes to us, to our city, to our families, to our lives, to our hearts—comes to claim his kingdom and bids us to follow, to be its grateful and courageous citizens.

This is the first day of the week in which he will die for us, die to show us in a way we will never forget that there is nowhere we can go that he does not

go with us, that there is nothing that can happen to us—no triumph, no suffering, no hell, no dying—that he has not experienced with us, and for us.

Garry Wills writes, “However we understand the mysterious sacrifice of the cross, one thing is certain, it is proof of God’s love. . . . God’s rescue raid into history” (p.122).

It just may be the most important day of the year: a day of two processions, a day when love confronts power, a day when love loves enough to become vulnerable, the first day of the week in which love will die and then destroy death, a day on which he comes to you and me to invite us to follow, to cast our lot with him and his kingdom.

One far fierce hour.

Amen.